Taming The Time-Sucker

By Kevin M. Savetz

Keeping Productivity Tools Productive

Computers help us to be productive. Most of the time. Certainly no one (well, no one who reads *MicroTimes*) will deny that they are useful tools.

But how often have you found yourself seething because something your computer did—or something you did to the computer—caused you to lose something of value?

No, I'm not referring to how a crashed hard disk can obliterate the only copy of your just-finished manuscript (although I've had some close calls in that department, myself). I'm talking about how computers—those wonderful time-saving tools—often end up as horrible time-suckers. Too often we let our computers get the best of us, and we devote too much of our time doing things to the computer, instead of with it.

Expect The Best; Prepare For The Worst

Case in point: Tonight I was trying to get my email program to understand that I wanted to receive mail on my computer from two accounts. Although this didn't seem like too much to ask, the very next time I ran the program I found that all of my preferences and settings were gone. Thanks to an unknown error—my goof? a programmer's bug?—I lost half an hour resetting all of my configuration options.

There are many more insidious ways to lose a half-hour, or an afternoon, to your computer's whims. Of course, there's the ever-popular pastime of accidentally deleting a file you really, really needed. The answer to that is (you've heard it a million times) "back up." People hear that word and cringe.

But backing up your important info doesn't mean buying an expensive DAT drive or shoving five hundred floppies in your computer, one after another, all day long. Backing up can be truly painless. For instance: I have two hard disks on my Mac. I use a little program that wakes up at four o'clock every morning and copies all the important stuff on one hard disk to the other, and vice versa. It doesn't bother copying applications and so on—it just copies my word processor documents and daily notes. My computer can miss a little sleep, so I don't have to spend hours rewriting an article after a crash.

Email

Electronic mail is another favorite way to lose time. Measure carefully the time you spend reading and replying to email and consider how well that time is spent. Are you getting work done and making contacts, or does email give you little to show for the time you spend with it?

I probably get more electronic mail than you do (I hope for your sake that I do—my email weighs in at about one thousand pieces each week). Some of it is from associates, some from people I don't know; some of it is junk. A lot of it I don't actually have to think much about: if someone requests one of my frequently asked questions lists, or information about my book, I fire off some detailed, boilerplate information. If a stranger starts asking me for free technical support, well, there's a special canned message for him, too. The use of prepackaged information helps me deal with the most common questions and problems that find their way to my emailbox. Think about what you say most often in email and consider if you can use a similar time-saving trick.

If you're on the Internet, you've probably heard of electronic mailing lists, discussion groups that take place in email. If your time is worth anything, think twice—think three times—before joining any. Mailing lists—especially high-volume ones—guarantee a constant influx of email, which can make you feel loved, but does nothing for your quest to get some work done.

If you do read any mailing lists, subscribe to them in "digest" format—this way, you'll get a few large messages with a lot of information in each, rather than a smattering of short, content-free ones.

The Waiting Game

I'm glad that I don't know how much of my time is spent each day just waiting for a computer—waiting for it to reboot, or for PageMaker to print a large document, or for Microsoft Word to load. Those wasted seconds and minutes stretch into hours. But how can you better spend that time, usually split into thirty-second to five-minute increments?

Personally, I always try to have something that doesn't depend on the computer within easy reach at my desk: an article to read, a letter to write, or a cup of tea to drink (or refill). Having something else to do, no matter how minute, takes the edge off of that finger-tapping numbness that comes from waiting for a slow machine.

Upgrades: The Ultimate Time-Waster

So, the new version of your favorite application is finally out. For a few (or a few hundred) dollars, you can upgrade to the latest and greatest version.

Is it really worth it? Aside from the initial cost of upgrading, consider the time it will take you to learn to use the new functions of the program, tweak its options to perfection, set it up just right, and become as comfortable with it as you are with the current version. If it's a complicated word processing or spreadsheet program (for example) those things will occur over a period of weeks. Is the time you will spend really worth the program's added features?

(I, too, am guilty. I'm writing this article with Microsoft Word 6. I've been using v5 for a year, and although 6 certainly is pretty, I have no idea how to do any of the things that are now second nature to me using the older version. I might stick with it, but the thought of resetting my toolbars, custom menus, and so on to their previous state just curdles my nerves. If I do return to v5, I am sure that I will never be able to load or print this article, ever again.)

Random Tweakage

I hesitate to even mention computer games, perhaps the most obvious time-suckers of them all. They're wonderful tools of procrastination: "Gee, I have another ten thousand words to write today, but first—another game of solitaire!"

The folks who write operating systems know we want this sort of diversion—Windows comes with two games, solitaire and Minefield. Every Mac since the original has shipped with the infamous "puzzle" game (System 7.5 comes with a customizable jigsaw puzzle, whee!).

But game-playing is easy to spot. Shooting flying saucers during work hours is a dead giveaway that you're letting the computer waste your time for you. Other acts of time-wasting frobbage are harder to spot. Maybe you don't even classify them as goofing off: What about your screensaver? Have you ever spent fifteen minutes tweaking its options? (God forbid you should have an imperfect screensaver.)

So, pay attention to how you spend time in front of your computer. While you're waiting for it to simplify your life, think about how you use it, and your favorite ways of using the world's best procrastination tool. You just might find some extra time. ■

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